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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 ADDIS ABABA 002561

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [EAID](#) [KDEM](#) [ET](#)  
SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA BRACES FOR AN UNCERTAIN RELATIONSHIP WITH  
THE U.S.

Classified By: Ambassador Donald Yamamoto for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY  
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11. (S/NF) Prime Minister Meles told the Ambassador during a private two hour meeting September 13 that Ethiopia is committed to U.S. relations as the cornerstone for its security and development, but many ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) party members and non-party members in the community are perplexed by the perceived "unpredictability" of the United States' commitment to Ethiopia. As the EPRDF heads into its annual ruling party congress this week, the general feeling among party members is that Ethiopia must brace for an uncertain future with the U.S. over misunderstandings and differences on human rights, democracy, and good governance. Ethiopia will remain, Meles underscored, committed to U.S. relations and views senior level bilateral discussions as important to enhancing mutual understanding, dispelling misinterpretations of each other's intentions, and promoting cooperation on common shared goals and objectives.

12. (S/NF) Senator Feingold's proposed bill, announced on the Ethiopian New Year (September 11), which raises concerns about Ethiopia's human rights record and proposed civil society organizations (CSO) law confirmed to some within the ruling party that rather than seeking dialogue to address differences and advance relations, the U.S. may seek, rather, to increase pressure on issues without any effort to understand Ethiopia's perspective or to work to address these issues. While the Ambassador pressed on legitimate U.S. concerns over political space for the 2010 elections, human rights and food distribution and delivery in the Ogaden and the CSO/NGO legislation, the Ambassador also stressed the U.S.'s proven record as a reliable partner on security, emergency relief and development. Enhancing our outreach to the ruling party's executive committee will help advance a more balanced view of the U.S. but, more importantly, will impress our view that they need to do more to address issues of concern to Ethiopia's key partner. End Summary.

UNPREDICTABILITY  
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13. (S/NF) The Prime Minister met with the Ambassador just prior to the opening of the annual ruling party congress which will chart Ethiopian Government (GoE) policies for the next year and beyond. He remarked to the Ambassador that Ethiopians are perplexed by U.S. criticism of Ethiopia's human rights and good governance records at a time when

relations should be strong. Meles specifically noted the activism of Ethiopian troops in peace keeping operations in Liberia and Darfur, and its unmatched cooperation with the U.S. in the region and on the continent in dealing with U.S. counterterrorism priorities. The Prime Minister said there is a general feeling among ruling party members, but also among professionals in the community, of an "unpredictable" United States that appears to seek fault rather than to work to address issues of concerns. A small minority of hard-liners within the party even see the West, in general, as seeking to undermine the EPRDF to allow for "political change." The Prime Minister, an astute observer of the U.S., clarified this by noting that many Ethiopians see the U.S. press, Congress, and others as reflective of the overall position held by the U.S.

¶4. (S/NF) The Prime Minister explained that Ethiopians look for established unchanging "frameworks" to explain and set policies and relations with other countries. This implies "predictability" and consistency of action. He pointed to relations with China, Russia, Israel, India, and Turkey as very clearly defined and predictable relations which do not deviate from perceived "frameworks." Trade and investment, loan guarantees, infrastructure development, and military purchases are the key bases for relations. These countries would not, and cannot, compete with the U.S. or detract Ethiopia from focusing on U.S. relations because the U.S. stands alone on security and economic development. The U.S. is viewed by Ethiopia in a more comprehensive approach where statements and analysis articulated by Congress, the U.S. press, or the White House serve as important pronouncements

ADDIS ABAB 00002561 002 OF 003

on issues and relations that could affect Ethiopia.

¶5. (S/NF) The Ambassador argued that given the diversity of the U.S. partnership with Ethiopia, the relationship is a comprehensive one. The Ambassador stressed that the U.S. is a reliable partner in providing emergency food aid, security, and development, but also noted that the United States also has very real concerns about some recent developments in Ethiopia. The Ambassador argued that by shying away from explaining their position, Ethiopian officials also miss opportunities to clarify where genuine misperceptions exist.

The Ambassador noted that Foreign Minister Seyoum spoke about Ethiopia's Millennium activities but avoided a question from the press on the Ogaden. Ethiopian officials need to address such issues and agreed with the Prime Minister that senior bilateral dialogue would be important in addressing issues. This will help Ethiopia explain its position but more important, underscore what steps need to be taken by Ethiopia to correct genuine problems and improve relations.

ISSUES OF CONCERN -- 2010 AND POLITICAL SPACE  
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¶6. (S/NF) The Prime Minister addressed each of the three issues raised by the Ambassador while underscoring that senior bilateral discussions would be important to dispel misunderstandings, resolve differences, and promote cooperation. The 2010 national elections and the concern over limited political space for the opposition -- raised privately by the Ambassador as well as in conjunction with the Ambassadors of the UK and France -- elicited familiar themes from the Prime Minister. Meles said the ruling party has expanded political space and that reforms in the parliament are unprecedented; expanding access by the opposition to setting the parliamentary agenda and granting time for debate on policy issues that go well beyond what was in place prior to the historic 2005 national elections, which saw an increase from 12 to 172 opposition members in the 547 member parliament. Meles noted that many opposition parties did not utilize the time allotted to them for policy debate, rather they focused on expanding their position within the Parliament.

¶7. (S/NF) The Prime Minister argued that the EPRDF's purpose is to protect and implement the constitution to the point where the EPRDF's ultimate goal is to be "redundant" and, in a deeper sense, "obsolete." At that time the issue will no longer be protecting the constitution and political institutions because there will be truly free and open debate in a multi-party, pluralistic political environment where whoever becomes Prime Minister would be fine because all the candidates are committed to the state and to the constitution.

¶8. (S/NF) He said this is the strength of the U.S. in which political parties debate issues and, whichever candidate wins, the constitution of the U.S. is safe. Those who oppose the constitution are marginalized. In Ethiopia, this is still not the case. Meles referred to Hailu Shawel the former leader of the opposition in 2005. He called him clearly undemocratic and argued that Hailu would use power to undermine the constitution and institutions which would then undermine the protection of the various ethnic groups and lead to a divided country. Meles was careful to note that this is not true of other opposition personalities. Meles firmly stated that Ethiopia is committed to a fully open, pluralistic political environment and will not turn away from this democratic road, and the EPRDF will take steps to protect this democratic process.

¶9. (S/NF) Meles finally noted that the opposition spends a great deal of time speaking with the press and foreign diplomats articulating an image of an overbearing and oppressive EPRDF party. Meles however argued that the EPRDF has done more to reach out to the people, noting that 85 percent of the population is rural based and this is where the real battle for the hearts and minds will take place, not in the press halls or in Embassies or in urban settings. Meles said the EPRDF is terrible with the press, but he assured the Ambassador that the EPRDF is committed to the people.

ADDIS ABAB 00002561 003 OF 003

#### ISSUES OF CONTENTION -- CSO/NGO LAW

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¶10. (S/NF) The Prime Minister restated his comments made to the Ambassador in previous meetings and in joint meetings with the US, UK, and French Ambassadors. The CSO law is important in establishing uniquely homegrown civil society groups that focus on Ethiopian solutions for Ethiopian problems. Meles said he was taken aback by the tough press and lobbying activities of foreign NGOs and Human Rights Watch over the CSO law. Meles claimed that NGO activities will not be affected in development and humanitarian relief -- the overwhelming part of foreign and local NGO activity in Ethiopia. It will be in the area of internal politics. He argued that the CSO law is logical in its base purpose of keeping foreign groups and entities out of Ethiopia's internal political process. That should be a distinctly Ethiopian activity. The Prime Minister noted changes made to the law, and indicated further changes before, and perhaps even after, the implementation of the law.

#### ISSUES OF CONCERN -- OGADEN AND HUMAN RIGHTS

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¶11. (S/NF) The Ambassador raised the problem of food delivery and distribution and the Prime Minister's agreement made in July permitting a greater U.S. and WFP role on logistical distribution of food. The Ambassador said the "hub and spoke" food distribution scheme had not been implemented yet and this was key to getting food to the region and was already agreed to by the government. The Prime Minister expressed confusion and said he would raise it with Deputy Prime Minister Adissu and that the U.S. should do the same as well. The Prime Minister said this should not be an issue of contention. The Prime Minister again articulated and

repeated his views that he would not allow his people to starve. Noting the tough insurgency and flow of extremists infiltrating Ethiopia from Somalia, he argued that his people come first. He said that Human Rights Watch had gotten its information wrong and that some NGOs have distorted the facts on the ground. Again, the Ambassador said the Ethiopian government needs to explain and be open about the Ogaden.

COMMENT

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¶12. (S/NF) The Ambassador has been questioned by business people, professors and other professionals who have also asked if the U.S. and Ethiopia are headed towards tough times over human rights and what effect this would have on trade and overall relations. The GoE's claim of uncertainty about the bilateral relationship likely stems from the relative stove-piping of issues raised by the steady flow of issue-specific USG visitors and interlocutors and the need for a broad bilateral policy dialogue. Post is embarking on an effort to expand direct outreach to a broader array of ruling party principals to expand their understanding of our partnership and interests. At the same time, we agree with the Prime Minister that an intensive bilateral policy discussion that captures the breadth of issues of mutual interest and concern is fundamental to reversing the current perception of unreliability and to better advancing U.S. foreign policy objectives. It is clear to the Ambassador from this and prior discussions that not only is the U.S., but the West more broadly, is not on the same page with the Ethiopians and that only through direct discussions will we be able to better bridge that gap. Joint U.S.-UK-French demarches to the Prime Minister in recent months have made it clear that the Europeans look to us to take the first necessary step in this direction. End Comment.

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